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ABSTRACT

A study conducted to determine if speaking activities facilitated growth in writing involved approximately 60 community college students enrolled in freshman composition. A review of the literature supported the notions that a definite relationship exists between talking and writing, that prewriting activities affect the quality of composition, and that dyadic communication offers the optimum opportunity for using oral language skills to strengthen writing. The study design included pretested experimental and control groups, with the experimental group experiencing 35-40 minutes of paired conversation prior to out-of-class writing. The students produced four sets of essays written in the traditional rhetorical modes sequence of description, narration, exposition, and argument that were rated for general merit and mechanics. Results of the study indicated that using speaking as a prewriting activity produced positive effects for assignments composed in each of the discourse modes: for description, in mechanics; for narration and exposition, in general merit and total evaluation; and for argumentation, in all three--mechanics, general merit, and total evaluation. (An extensive bibliography is appended.) (AEA)

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Speaking As A Pre-Writing Activity:

Its Application To Teaching Community College Freshman Composition Pupils

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Although speaking activities are not part of the traditional paradigm of composition instruction, pedagogical theories and psychological findings--even homespun pieces of wisdom--indicate that speaking might be used to facilitate growth in writing. The interest in researching the relationship between speaking activities and writing has been a relatively minor trend, given all of the disciplinary divorces that have occurred during the last half century in our profession. Yet, the interest has been ongoing: the first volume of Research in the Teaching of English, in 1967, in fact, included a piece by Anthony Tovatt and Ebert Miller (34) entitled "The Sound of Writing," which discussed the attempt to use speaking activities to improve the writing of ninth-graders. Over the years, other articles have been written and papers have been delivered at conferences on this topic, and I have included some of these on the bibliographical handout.

My talk is based on experimental research that I conducted last semester with four classes of Freshman Composition pupils at Prince George's Community College, in Largo, Maryland, which I undertook in writing my dissertation at the University of Maryland. The experimental period lasted approximately thirteen weeks, and two professors each taught one experimental group and one control group. The students all attended day-classes, mostly on a full-time basis, and the great majority had just graduated from high school, averaging nineteen years in age. White students outnumbered black students three-to-one, and there were slightly more

female students than males.

The primary purpose of this study was to determine whether a talk-write composing pedagogy, which utilizes speaking as a pre-writing activity, would have any positive effect on students' writing performance. The methodology that I investigated involved an experimental treatment having pupils pair up with one another in order to discuss their writing topics prior to writing their essays. These conversations--communications scientists call them "communication dyads"--occurred on four different occasions, each time for about 45 minutes of class time preceding the class meeting for which the finished essays were due.

Five sets of essays were collected. The first set consisted of the diagnostic papers, written during the first day of class. These were evaluated as a pre-test in order to determine whether any significant pre-existing differences in writing performance between the two groups would influence the interpretation of the final results. It was determined that there was no significant difference.

The data from which the present conclusions are drawn came from four sets of essays written in the traditional rhetorical modes sequence of description, narration, exposition and argumentation. All of the essays were written outside of class--initially, we collected 74 essays for the descriptive assignment, but by the time of the argumentative essay, a drop-out rate had reduced the sample size to 58.

A team of three outside raters who are graduate teaching assistants of English 101 at the University of Maryland evaluated all of the essays. The instrument used for assessment was the

Diederich Scale, an analytic scale which characterizes an essay's features along a five-point high-to-low scoring line. In addition to a numerical total score, the Diederich Scale is comprised of two sets of subscores--for general merit (basically style, and ideas and their development and organization) and mechanics (basically sentence structure, grammar, punctuation and spelling). Analysis of the data involved comparing the two groups' mean scores on these three criteria--total score, general merit and mechanics--for each of the rhetorical modes. A directional t test was the statistic employed, and the confidence level of the findings was set at .05.

My findings indicate that the treatment had a salubrious effect for every writing assignment, but before I detail these outcomes, I want to give you something of a background. More important than the individual outcome of this single project is the collective work in the relationship of talking and writing, pre-writing activities, and communication theory of which it is a part.

In my own experiences teaching English at the college and high school level, I have been repeatedly struck by the initial huge disparity between my students' writing skills and their speaking skills. My students could discuss ideas vigorously and intelligently, and in speaking, they usually used language with clarity, coherence and precision. Yet, when it came to writing, they were often unable to produce much of anything with these qualities. Apprehension and clumsiness subverted the good traits of their oral competence. For many of our students, the skills of oracy are far in advance of those of literacy. Many composition

teachers probably wish that their students wrote as well as they spoke; some commonsense advice we often give to students is to "write by ear." This composition model, then, encourages instruction that uses what students do well--talk--to help them to improve what they do not do as well--write. It emphasizes that writing is a process, one reflecting a communicative purpose and facilitating social interaction.

Robert Zoellner is the writing teacher and researcher whose ideas have been most seminal in this area. In the January 1969 issue of College English, Zoellner published his monograph, "Talk-Write--A Behavioral Approach for Composition."(40) In this article he articulated the hypothesis that through a talk-write dialogue, speaking skills in the vocal modality could be harnessed to develop writing skills in the scribal modality. Thus, one of the cornerstones on which the talk-write practice is based is that of intermodal transfer.

As everyone here knows, writing is not simply speech recorded on paper. I am not saying that, and I do not believe other researchers who advocate using speaking in tandem with writing have said that. What can be said with some confidence, rather, is that speaking can form a word pattern substrate that is rhetorically workable as a basis for writing. Speaking and listening help writers to create meaning; they can also help constellating ideas to coalesce.

The difference between speaking and writing are well-documented, but the rift may not be all that huge. The left hemisphere of the brain is specialized for both of these processes, and both linguistic activities likely draw on a common conceptual reservoir.

The differences between the two may be primarily ones of degree than of kind. As James Moffett has written: (20, 21)

> Speaking and writing are essentially just relating and abstracting some version of what at some moment one is thinking . . . Representing reality to oneself and presenting it to others are merely aspects of the same process, which is abstraction. . . . . The best strategy for discussing a certain topic might be exactly the strategy the student should adopt in writing about that topic . . . through discussion, students can learn together about handling some of the problems of abstract writing, from how to assert a single statement to how to phrase an attack on a subject. Interaction between discussion and writing is essential.

Recognizing that writing and speaking are different, however, does not preclude speaking's being used as a worthwhile pre-writing activity; especially if language is seen as the purposeful transaction of the individual with his or her environment, then written language and spoken language can be conceived as coequal representation of that kind of transaction, as Julia Falk(5) suggests.

Probably most composition teachers would agree with the recommendation that teachers should spend more time on what happens before pupils write than on what happens after they write. Pre-writing time--that time of incubation that promotes exploratory reasoning when ideas come into focus--is crucial to the composing process, as researchers have shown. Basically, pre-writing activities have been suggested to help writers to develop a cognitive template for their ideas and to feel an affective comfort with the writing task at hand, establishing a commitment to it.

A fair amount of research has been devoted to various heuristic

procedures that seek to engage students in the regular methods of discovery and invention. The tagmemic heuristic procedure engages students in varying perspectives, for instance, while other pre-writing activities include journal keeping, analogizing and meditating. Problem-solving approaches to composition may fall within this domain as well. The hallmark of these kinds of pre-writing activities is that they are grounded in the principle, it seems to me, of bringing to the threshold of the student-writer's consciousness an awareness of how the mind works, engendering some control of the cognitive activities that come into play in thinking through writing. These kinds of models imply that poor writing is more often than not a manifestation of inadequate thinking.

In contrast, the talk-write methodology hypothesizes that usually, the downfall of poor writing is not so much that it manifests poor thinking but that it is a result of maladaptive scribal behavior. The talk-write methodology shifts the focus then to the behavior of writing and the acts preceding writing. In this way, as in others, the talk-write model is a behavioral model for writing.

At every educational level, researchers and teachers have recognized the pragmatic effectiveness of speaking as a pre-writing activity. At the elementary school level, for instance, Kirkton (14) has summarized that researchers in the elementary language arts recommend that children "talk out" prior to writing. Talking as a worthwile prelude to good writing for children has also been affirmed by Lopate and Folta, (18, 7) who discuss talking's

capacity to help persons to discover ideas and to define the limits of their subject. John Schultz's (30) Story Workshop method also requires children to engage in numerous oral tellings and readings prior to writing.

At the secondary school level, oral brainstorming and discussion have been repeatedly advocated as preliminary activities which facilitate students' generating good writing. Tovatt (33) found that teen-agers who have an opportunity to speak their ideas into a tape recorder and then to listen to the recording prior to writing, benefit by becoming more aware of their specific skill weakness. Golub, (8) in experimental research with a ninth-grade sample, found that having a controlled oral discussion prior to writing had a significantly positive effect on his students' writing. In the English Journal a couple of years ago, Wixon and Stone (38) also favorably describe a methodology in which students paired up to talk to one another prior to writing.

At the college level, there has been discussion of nurturing writing with speaking activities for some time. Hurst Anderson's (1) description of "An Experiment in Oral and Written English" in 1933 embodies just that, although in the 40's, Loy (19) classifies the attempt to coordinate writing and speaking as "a new approach." More recently, O'Neal (25) favorably relates having his college composition pupils pair up to talk and to write together, and in A Laboratory Approach to Writing, Laque and Sherwood (17) advocate this kind of activity. Koch and Brazil (16) also recommend a number of oral pre-writing activities in Strategies for Teaching the Composition Process.

Speaking at the pre-writing stage, then, enables the student-writer to consolidate skills in one domain and to proceed to

another.

Of all kinds of speech episodes, dyadic communication offers the optimum opportunity for using oral language skills to strengthen writing. As a face-to-face information sharing process engaging two persons who function simultaneously as speaker and listener, dyadic communication embodies the essence of all communication in its interaction and reciprocity. Torrance (51) has shown that generally, the dyad format fosters a greater willingness to undertake difficult tasks and that it encourages creative and original thinking. Simply, dyadic communication is a microcosm of the impulse to work together.

The dyad itself is relatively independent of specific course content, but it accommodates especially well to composition teaching. The context of classmates conversing about writing topics typifies the setting described by communication theorists as effective and emotionally rewarding. As Triandis' (52) research shows, for instance, when two communicators are cognitively similar, that is, oriented in like ways to the significant aspects of their environment, communication is likely to succeed. In the "environment" of a specific writing assignment, it may be presumed that students share like concerns. Furthermore, as Triandis' work also demonstrates, the phenomenon of communicators' using similar language promotes clarity and affinity. In the talk-write communication dyad, it can also be assumed that peers use the same kind of language when talking with one another.

Communication theorists also focus on the positive effects that feedback usually yields. By increasing the effectiveness of

communication, as Leavitt and Mueller (47) detail, feedback increases one's certainty that one is getting across, thereby increasing one's confidence as a communicator. That the feedback is positive--and in this study students were encouraged to be very supportive of one another--maintains, if not increases, communication. In addition, positive feedback contributes to emotional stability and mental development: confirmation from others leads to confirmation of oneself, and since one's self esteem as a communicator carries a decisive impact on one's ability to communicate, initial success talking could easily facilitate later success writing.

It has been claimed that the audience, however intangible, always motivates writing. In the talk-write method, this is deliberately and consciously so. Although growth in writing involves internalizing the audience, of course, an actual listening person may be the perfect intermediary for writers unable to traverse alone the egocentric route from themselves to a totally abstract other. This kind of dialogical navigation may be exactly what their full-fledged monological writing requires.

Dyadic communication is also valuable for making students responsible for their own learning and responsive to one another. It is a kind of collaborative learning which encourages students to unite as what Lou Kelly (12) calls a "community of learners," cooperative rather than competitive. It also helps to make writing real, removing it from sequestration and placing it in the context of other ongoing activities. Finally, dyadic communication promotes the kind of experiential learning Carl Rogers describes as being personally involving and self-initiated, with an essence of meaning.

Dyads create the conditions for creativity, reducing the stress that so often paralyzes students before they write.

The nitty-gritty of my research involved having experimental group students pair up with one another to converse about the subject matter on which they were planning to write their essays. In order to facilitate these conversations, desk-top chairs were arranged so that pupils in each dyad could face one another. While some students brought paper on which ideas were already jotted down, it appeared that most did not. Occasionally, students would note something in writing during the conversations, but most notes of ideas and suggestions emerging from the conversations were taken at its conclusion, after about 35-40 minutes.

On the days when the conversations occurred for the experimental group, the control group continued with its ongoing activities (e.g., the study of grammar).

The findings of this study were as follows:

Speaking as a pre-writing activity has a statistically significant positive effect on the general merit (ideas, etc.) of students' writing for essays composed in the modes of narration, exposition and argumentation. The components of general merit are "naturals" to benefit from using speaking to nurture writing, for speaking about a topic ahead of time means devoting and exchanging thought to and about it that will later be written. With an audience providing feedback and helping to check any conceptual gaps, irrelevancies or redundancies, organization is strengthened: a speaker carefully explicating points and relating them to a theme in order to meet the needs of an actual listening audience will likely perform the same service for the more abstract reading audience.

Talking on a one-to-one basis with one's peers discourages the kind of writing that Ken Macrorie calls "Engfish" that makes one sound like a committee rather than a person.

For the descriptive writing assignment, this was not the outcome. There was no significant difference between the groups for general merit. Possibly, the content of a descriptive essay, prior to writing, is more or less pre-formed (i.e., it is not a dialogical mode): the task of writing realistic description requires not so much invention as it does a verbal recreation of phenomena, perhaps.

For the descriptive mode, though, the experimental treatment did have a statistically significant positive effect on the mechanics of students' writing. It might be hypothesized that for the descriptive assignment, pupils could channel energy that is usually reserved for generating information into attending to formal concerns, thereby composing essays that demonstrate a marked superiority in using the mechanical conventions of writing.

Mechanics were also significantly improved for writing in the argumentative mode. It may be conjectured that this outcome is due to the fact that students were placed in something of a "comfort zone" with the content of their writing by having previously articulated it. It is likely, for instance, that any nagging doubts about the final support for one's argument would be greatly diminished during a conversation in which one voiced and discussed these proofs. This confidence with content, then, would enable pupils to devote more effort to ensure that the mechanical aspects of their writing were standard.

Finally, for argumentation, exposition and narration, using speaking as a pre-writing activity produced a statistically sig-

nificant positive effect on the experimental group's essays' total evaluation.

It can be concluded from the findings of this research project, then, that using speaking as a pre-writing activity produces positive effects for assignments composed in each of the modes of discourse: for description, in mechanics; for narration and exposition, in general merit and total evaluation; and for argumentation, in all three--mechanics, general merit and total evaluation. Whether this cumulative progression is a function of the natures of the rhetorical modes of discourse or of the increased efficacy of the conversational technique with practice (or of something else) remains for other research to determine.

Although this single talk-write methodology is not a panacea, it can help to encourage a process of composing that is lively, personal and intellectual.

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